

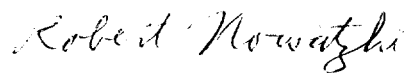
Perspectives in a Young Century

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert Nowatzki".

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## Abstract

As the title "Perspectives in a Young Century" implies, my concept for this creative project was to write short stories that illustrated the lives of different types of people living in this postmodern society. I also wanted to include some poetry that might offer the reader some insight into my personal feelings about love, politics, and the struggle to cope with this fast paced, technological world that we have come to know. By doing this, my hope is that certain readers might identify with a particular character or a specific line of poetry and feel like they actually have something in common with others in a world that seems continually divided and distant. In this abstract, I have attempted to summarize the major themes of my short stories so that my intentions are understood more clearly and with the hope that a reader might look at the story differently after seeing exactly what messages I was trying to convey in it.

My first story is titled "Sacrifice." With this story, I tried to examine the life of a high-profile sports figure and all of the stress that comes with being famous. I was particularly interested in boxing because of its gruesome nature and the fact that billions of dollars are generated by this barbaric sport still to this day. Although our society is supposedly concerned with things such as ridding the media of violent images and striving toward a more peaceful world, millions of people still won't hesitate to spend money watching two people bash each other's heads in. Not only did I try to allude to this point throughout the story, but I also focused on the media scrutiny that follows around sports figures like the main character Cedric. Now that the media is so pervasive and all-encompassing, the smallest details of an athlete's life are often put on display for the world, and no matter how strong-willed that particular athlete is, the burden has to weigh them down sometimes. With Cedric, I also made a point to make him an African-American athlete, because I am intrigued with the way that these people are treated in our culture. There seems to be a double standard, where our society claims to want African-Americans and other minorities to succeed, but when they do so in excess such as a boxer like Cedric or an entertainer, the media and others constantly try to pick them apart and find flaws in their character. All of these pressures compounded for Cedric, and throughout the story the reader can see his mental state become more and more fragile. I thought that contrasting Cedric's fragile persona with his muscular figure would also be interesting, and I hope that the reader might come away from the story actually feeling some sympathy for someone like Cedric who may be a multi-millionaire, but is still a regular person inside with conflicted thoughts and emotions.

With my second story, "Station Fever," I took a much more light-hearted approach and tried to make the story comical and fun to read. I first got the idea in a journalism class where we had an assignment to take a regular news story and try to make a humorous column out of it. I selected a news clip about a team of Russian cosmonauts heading up to the space station, and after I started to develop ideas for the column, I saw an opportunity to stretch it into a short story. For the most part, the story speaks for itself. A group of three cosmonauts take a trip to the space station to do experiments with growing food in low-gravity conditions. Before they went on the mission, the three were good friends who hung out together even outside of the workplace. However, because they know each other so well, after they are isolated up in the station for a little while,

they start to pick at each other's faults and the situation becomes childish. Basically, I thought it would be a funny idea to have a group of learned, rational scientists degenerate into a couple of bickering roommates, much like the ones you find on college campuses. After I had completed the story, the tragedy with the U.S. space shuttle made me think twice about including the story in this project since it showed space exploration in such a trivial way. However, I came to the conclusion that the story was not meant to be taken seriously anyway, and a story about space that wasn't filled with technological jargon and science-fiction clichés just might be refreshing to readers.

"Taking It" is the title of my third short story, and it is the first one to focus on a main character that is simply an average, middle-aged U.S. citizen. This main character's name is Samuel, and he is the quintessential "momma's boy." In a society that has gradually become more feminized over the years, these people whose mothers continue to rule their life even after they are supposedly independent intrigue me. The Oedipal complex idea relates to this very much, and although I didn't specifically allude to it in the story, the concept was in the back of my mind as I wrote the story. The main character Samuel is in his mid-thirties, and although his mother has been dead for a few years, her incessant guidelines on how to live the proper life still dominate Samuel's decisions. He wishes to break free from her grasp, and he decides that he wants to do something rebellious that she would not have approved of had she been alive. He considers several options, but many of them are illegal, and although he desires to do something rebellious, he still follows the rules strictly and always strives to be the perfect law-abiding citizen. Therefore, he decides to go with a psychic reading, because his mother's religious beliefs firmly condemned superstition and sorcery, but it is not illegal to visit a psychic. He goes to a side of town that he rarely frequents so that there is less of a chance of someone recognizing him, because his conscience still haunts him and he still feels the need to hide from his mother's all-seeing eye. After visiting the psychic, Samuel becomes uncomfortable with how accurate the psychic is about his life, and he becomes flustered and leaves. As he gets ready to drive home, he sees a woman outside of the car parked in front of him who has a flat tire, and he decides to help her. A conversation ensues, and the woman eventually asks Samuel out on a date. This obviously makes him extremely nervous, but he decides that this is the perfect chance to turn a new page in his life, and he takes it.

My final short story is basically an autobiographical piece about my relationship with my grandfather on my mother's side of the family. His wife died when I was very young, so I never came to know my grandmother, and after her death my grandfather fell into a deep state of depression, leaving him detached and completely non-influential in my development as a young man. I know this fact always bothered my mother, and it caused the subject to be a touchy one in my house for several years. I got the idea to write a story about it after I took a trip to see my grandfather in his assisted living facility while I was home one summer during college. I had never really had an in-depth conversation with him before this day, and after I visited him and was amazed by how philosophical and

made it a more heart-felt story that perhaps other young people like me with relatives in nursing homes might relate to. The story also contains a deeper theme about life and the fast pace at which it goes by, and this was my attempt to bring a more universal truth to this personal and emotional story.

As for my poetry, for the most part I like to let it speak for itself. As I stated earlier, my main purpose for including the poetry was to give the reader some insight into my personal thoughts and emotions that influence my writing, both poetry and prose. Many of the poems contain social commentary and my political views, and others simply try to create a scene, describe someone, or speak of love, the strongest of human emotions. In general, I like to play with the English language and create inner rhymes, odd meters, and hidden meanings in my poetry. This might cause some people to think that the poetry is too abstract and they might not pick up on all of the meanings that I intended to convey, but if they are captivated by just one line of a poem, I feel like my writings have been a success. I think the beauty of poetry is that it can be interpreted in different ways by different people, and although the author may have had a specific theme in mind, if a reader can take away an entirely different meaning, that just makes the poem more special. Like the short stories that I have included, I hope that my poetry illustrates various perspectives from different types of people living in this new century, and if the reader can feel like he or she shares a common bond with a particular character in my story or a concept in my poetry, I feel like I have touched them in some way and contributed something meaningful to this increasingly meaningless world.

## Sacrifice

Cedric Brooks, heavyweight champion of the world, sat comfortably in his limousine with his arms stretched out across the back seat. His giant wingspan covered the diameter of the car; his fingertips rested against opposing windows. He stared at each of his enormous arms and thought about how absurd it was that he had insurance plans on both of them. The team of financial planners and lawyers that surrounded him had insisted upon it; now he realized that it was an intelligent move. His arms and the enormous fists that they supported were the entire source of his livelihood. These arms of brute strength and the body that propelled them were at the center of an enterprise that generated billions of dollars.

All of this made Cedric uneasy at times. Every once in a while he could actually feel the weight that he carried. He did not want the financial responsibilities and all of the media attention in his face; he was just a boxer. He felt that he had been given a gift from God, a powerful gift, and once he took his focus away from this gift, he knew that he would fall. At the peak of his success, Cedric was surrounded by people whose gifts revolved around their brains, giving them the ability to crunch numbers, give financial projections and craft carefully written releases to the media. Cedric knew nothing about this sector of his enterprise, and he preferred not to worry about it.

Today, though, he was faced with a dilemma for which he was not prepared. He had already read about it in the papers before his own people had the chance to give him their story. The press loved to glorify scandal. Once a public figure slipped up at all, the media was there, swarming like furious stinging insects. David Liebman, Cedric's head

attorney, had left a message on his phone earlier that morning saying something about accusations of tax evasion, but Cedric didn't think it was such a big concern. He knew nothing about income tax evasion, so how could he be charged with it? Taxes were the business of his financial advisors. His only responsibilities were taking care of his family and keeping his body in top physical shape. However, he knew that he faced serious repercussions if convicted of these charges. He didn't know the details of it all, but he had heard about other incidents where celebrities had paid huge fines and even gone to prison on tax evasion charges.

Cedric pressed his finger tips against his temples, wishing that everything would somehow disappear. The pressure of defending his title was enough of a mental strain, but these recent legal matters compounded it. Allegations flew all around him and it seemed like he couldn't go anywhere without seeing his face on television or in print. The problem was, he didn't know if the news was about the fight or the scandal. When he went out in public he noticed people pointing at him and whispering to their companions. He had become used to this kind of public attention, but after the recent accusations, Cedric felt intimidated by his public persona. Instead of being the one dishing out fear and receiving admiration, he felt like the victim.

Suddenly, the limousine door swung open, startling Cedric and breaking up his thoughts. "Rise up, champ, you gotta make it to that press conference on time." His manager Lou stood outside of the car, holding the door open and shouting at him.

"Man, I forgot all about *that* shit."

"Why the hell do you think you're here so early? The fight's not for another six hours."

"I just figured we were going to warm up for a little longer or something. You know, vibe on the place before I go out there." Cedric didn't truly think this; he knew that the press conference was inevitable. He simply didn't want to show up.

"You think we would break your routine after all this success? What's wrong with you Ced? You've been actin' strange lately."

"What the hell do you think is wrong with me?" Cedric lashed out. "Not only do I have to slug it out with Machada tonight, but those reporters are about to tear me up in there. Don't act like you don't know what I'm talkin' about. That tax evasion shit's got me facin' time or somethin', and you think I should be all calm about it?"

"Whoa, slow down, man. You know I'm on your side, champ." Lou put both hands on Cedric's wide shoulders. "Whose corner am I standin' in? Whose ass have I worked to mold for twelve years now?" Cedric bowed his head. "I know that tax situation is hectic for you, man. Every time a black man has some success they try to take it away from him. You have to learn that. You're not the first, and you definitely won't be the last. But forget about all that tonight, you hear me? 'Cause if you take that shit into the ring with you, it's gonna bring you down fast."

"I know Lou; I'll block it out. I'm just not ready for that mob of reporters."

"Don't worry champ, those dudes in suits are gonna be all around you, and they ain't gonna let you go down, 'cause you're payin' their bills! Know what I'm sayin'?"

"I know, I'm just startin' to hate everything that surrounds this ugly sport."

"*Ugly!* Well, it might not be pretty, son, but you better not bite the hand that feeds you. Now, I'm done talkin' about it, so get in there and put on a good face. If they see that you aren't confident, they'll eat you up." Lou slowly walked away, shouting, "You're



the champion of the world! But you're late!" Sometimes Lou got under his skin, but Cedric respected him like a father, and he could do nothing but lower his head and walk in to face the ravenous press.

As soon as he entered the overcrowded press conference, bulbs began to flash and reporters fumbled with their notepads and recorders. Cedric flashed a fake smile and seated himself between his promoter Ron Sizlac and attorney David Liebman. He felt safe between these masters of public relations. They could deflect any negative accusations and respond with vague yet explanatory remarks. After a brief introductory statement by Sizlac, the madness began. A number of reporters began to shout questions at once, and Sizlac grabbed the microphone and shouted, "One at a time for God's sake! And state your name and the organization you're with first, or we'll cut you off." The chaos finally settled, and order was restored as the reporters realized that they couldn't all interrogate simultaneously.

A female journalist near the front evidently saw the chance to step in, and she stood up to ask her question, pen and pad in hand. "Melissa Frank, I'm with the Vegas Tribunal. Cedric, I haven't heard you comment on the recent allegations of income tax evasion. Are you building your case yet?"

Immediately, David Liebman stood up, resting his hand on the champ's shoulder reassuringly. "As Cedric's attorney I will speak on his behalf about these legal matters." Cedric breathed an inward sigh of relief. His lawyer continued, "these allegations were a shock to my entire staff, and I would like to assure all of you that Cedric knew absolutely nothing about the management of his taxes. It is preposterous to think that any professional athlete in the midst of training for major competition would concern himself

with figuring his taxes, let alone try to cheat on them!” The room was silenced. The reporter slowly sat down and there was an uncomfortable pause in the proceedings. Cedric, on the other hand, felt comfortable for the first time in days. He smiled confidently and slouched in his chair. He glanced over the crowd of reporters and finally felt like he had the upper hand. Liebman sat down and gave Cedric another look of reassurance, and Cedric smiled at him as a sign of gratitude.

Another reporter addressed the champ. “Brad Wilson, reporter for the San Diego Times. Uh, Cedric, aside from the legalities of it all, how has this controversy affected you mentally as you prepare for the fight?” Cedric stared at the man who asked the question and slowly leaned toward the microphone in front of him on the table.

“That’s an excellent question, sir.” Cedric politely smiled and the mood in the room lightened. The journalist looked at the champ, chuckled, and shifted his focus back to his notepad in anticipation of a response. Liebman gave Cedric a look of precaution, but Cedric knew not to say anything important about the case, and felt like getting some things off of his chest for once, while the public eye was watching. “To be completely honest, the accusations against me *have* affected me somewhat the past week or so. However, most of my heavy training was way before all of this was an issue, so I definitely think I’m still prepared to defend my title.” He felt confident. “It’s just a little hard to hear your name in the midst of scandal all of the time. I didn’t choose to become famous. I have a gift, and I am grateful for it, but to tell you the truth, I hate being in the spotlight; I feel blinded and vulnerable sometimes.” The reporters glanced around at each other. Everyone was amazed at how calm and open this beast of the ring was acting, but no one was more surprised than Cedric. It was exhilarating to let out his emotions, but he didn’t

know exactly why he had chosen to do it in front of this mob of rude journalists. Maybe he wanted the public to see him as a regular person capable of being fragile.

Things seemed strange, almost too comfortable. Cedric had always hated press conferences, and he had dreaded this particular one more than ever before, but suddenly he felt vindicated. He felt somewhat at peace, but he also could not avoid the feeling that he was taking a curtain call. Before this moment, he had never considered turning his back on his career, but the desire now crept in, urging him to walk away from it all. The rest of the press conference was a blur. Cedric couldn't concentrate and his responses became empty and meaningless. He no longer cared what was being said. He was concentrating on the fight. If indeed it would be his last, he needed to go out in a flurry. He would never consider bowing out of the fight at this point. So much promotion and excitement had been generated over it that he would be a disgrace to himself and the sport if he were to forfeit. Eventually, he looked up at the clock and realized that almost two hours had gone by. Time was eluding him, and he started to feel slightly uncomfortable again. There was never enough time to prepare for a fight, and he desperately needed to get into his zone.

Cedric leaned over and whispered to Sizlac, his promoter, "Where's Lou?"

"I think he's waiting in Locker Room A with Barry and Joe. What's up?"

"I need to go talk to him. I need a little extra time to get warmed up. I've said everything I need to say here, right?"

"Yeah, you handled it better than I've ever seen you before. You were almost too cool."

"Yeah, I don't know why, but I feel different tonight. It's a weird feeling. I just

really need to get my head in tune before I go out into the ring.”

“Okay, kid. You do whatever you need to do.” Ron stood up, patted Cedric on the back, and addressed the press. “The champ has said enough for tonight. He needs to start warming up for the performance of his life!”

Cedric stood, bowed to the crowd of reporters, and slipped out of the room. Instantly, they began to yell and tried to sneak in extra questions, but Cedric simply ignored them and walked away silently. He needed the shelter of the locker room now. He needed Lou to yell at him and excite him before the fight. The locker room would be quiet, away from the reporters and away from the crowd that would soon pack the arena. Walking down a concrete hallway, he finally reached a door with “Locker Room A” inscribed above it on a plaque. He breathed deeply and shoved open the locker room door.

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The champ sat hunched over, his chest heaving up and down. He stared down at the cracked tile floor of the dingy locker room, adrenaline flowing through his body. As his manager Lou continued to shout strategies, Cedric’s pulse accelerated, and all of his senses heightened. He lifted his head and looked around the room. He had hoped that the locker room would bring shelter, but he could only feel hostility in the room beating down on him. Over the years, people had carved into the tables, and the walls were covered

with scribbles and slogans, but Cedric could not take his eyes off of one particular message. It was written in maroon, and it stated, "You are their sacrifice."

Everything in the room began to take on a murky yellow color, and the smells of mildew, adhesive cream, and athletic tape permeated the air. There were several dents in the lockers and yellow foam erupted from tears in the seat cushions. This place had been a breeding ground of uncontrolled hate and animosity for years. Cedric sat with his enormous hands on the table in front of him, and Lou continued to weave tape in between his fingers, creating an enlarged fist of contempt.

"He's got nothing on you, you hear me! You're a lion! You are going to tear him apart!" Lou screamed at Cedric, who sat in a trance, his emotions churning inside of him. He thought about the phrase on the wall, and it enraged him. It continued to repeat in his head while the sounds of the crowd danced around it. The concrete hallway leading to the locker room amplified the hum of the crowd in the arena. They continued to roar, lusting for blood and anticipating the battle that was about to take place. Cedric remained contemplative, even though he knew it wasn't good for his attitude going into the fight. He had been the undisputed champion for two full years, and suddenly he felt that he was due to fail for the first time. He could not stop thinking about the phrase on the wall.

"You are their sacrifice." It was a constant reminder of his inferiority. No matter how much money they jammed into his pockets to annihilate his opponent, others would always be making more off of him. There was a constant entourage of businessmen, lawyers and promoters around him at all times, and for what? He wondered, had society progressed at all since the days of the gladiators? The only difference was that now millions of dollars were being generated by this gruesome event, held in a massive indoor

arena in Las Vegas, the modern day Sodom. It was only a matter of time before the flames came raining down.

Lou smacked Cedric and screamed, "Wake up, champ! You hear those people screaming? They want *you*, man. Under those bright lights, tearin' that other boy's head off! Are you ready?"

"Hell yeah! I'm a lion! I'm going to tear him apart!"

"They're playin' your music, champ. Go out there and massacre that fool!"

Cedric lurched out of the locker room. It was time to dive into the hype. He entered the arena and the crowd bellowed. A giant image of him appeared on the overhead screen and the crowd praised him like an idol. He glanced around and saw an old man staring directly at him and screaming, but he couldn't hear a thing. The smoke in the arena wafted into the brilliant beams of light, which blinded Cedric for a moment. The announcer provoked the crowd and brought them to a feverish pitch. They seemed to move in unison and the volume of their roars was overwhelming.

After entering the illuminated ring, the next thing Cedric remembered was lying prostrate on the canvas. He had only lasted three rounds, and everyone could tell that the boxer who had once dominated the world was now just a shadow of the man he used to be. He writhed on the canvas, struggling to grasp any sort of rational thought. The lines between life and death were blurring. The blinding lights of the arena were misty now. He could still hear the fickle crowd, hailing a new champion, a grim chorus. Yet amidst all of this, one thing remained constant. The phrase scribbled on the locker room wall repeated in his mind. It jeered him, whispering, "You are their sacrifice."

Sonnet post-9/11

Nothing seems to be in its right order.  
Deception rules our lost society.  
Already chaos in this first quarter,  
all sides claiming ultimate piety.  
Radical ideals cause radical acts,  
and no explanation can be perused.  
Hate and disorder are simply the facts.  
Naiveté and trust leave us confused.  
So where will we be in another year?  
Progress seems to have slowed its pace right now.  
We are a nation holding back the tears,  
continuously asking why, and how?  
But answers can be the hardest questions  
when they don't provide any connections.

## International Anthem

Divided, we just keep on standing.  
Little missiles keep on landing  
anywhere we choose; there's no more war.  
We just push buttons now and keep the score.  
Changing every place except for  
where we need it the most,  
which is right here at home.  
This system is cutthroat.

Spitting rudimentary phrases amazes the masses.  
Sugarcoated answers come from friendly fascists.  
They hide behind gestures and false concern,  
but ambition festers inside of them and burns.  
We've got crooks in office and murder in schools,  
overcrowded prisons and bigoted fools.  
Talk of corruption and lies in the clergy  
while they divert our eyes from conspiracy.

Rally around your icons because that's all that you have.  
Ignorance provides shelter and patriotism is a fad.



## Roots

Balance: A thing of the past.  
Its last breath a steel hum,  
consumed it gasped.

Burning in all directions  
flames became comfortable breezes.  
Now we smile as we drown,  
sinking into industry's sneezes.

Revolutions left plenty of materials  
but few solutions.  
In their wake we're pulled,  
propelled by delusions.

Halcyon days are gone forever;  
lost for the sake of new insanity.  
Humanity gasps for air but it's all polluted.  
Convoluting dreams awake minds of reason,  
who watch the seasons blend as the balance ends.

Off kilter they filter their questioning thoughts  
and leave only acceptance and compensation,  
alleviation of immediate confrontations.

But the roots remain to devour the soil.  
A simmering froth will rise to a boil.

## Station Fever

Before Sergei, Frank and Yuri went up to the space station they were like brothers. They hung out at the academy together and played cards together on Saturdays. They had even been on a triple date before. More camaraderie could not be expected of a crew. They relied on each other like the individual components of a well-oiled machine, and no one man's job was seen as more important than the other's. Sergei, a short and stocky man in his forties, was the cosmonaut with the most seniority in the space program, and therefore he was appointed captain of the mission. Yuri, a relative newcomer to the program, was selected as second flight engineer because of his impressive skills and physical prowess. A strong and handsome young man, Yuri had wowed the teachers at the academy with his wit, ingenuity, and overall charm. Frank, the lone Russian of French descent on the mission, was an unremarkable man in appearance but his skills made him invaluable to the program. A cosmonaut with a strong background in botany, Frank was considered essential to this particular mission. The main focus of this trip to the space station was experiments with growing conditions in low gravity conditions, with the hope that one day food might be able to be produced in outer space.

For these reasons, Sergei, Frank, and Yuri were considered the best team for the mission, and several people throughout the program were excited about the possibilities in store. However, there were those on the council who didn't think it was a good idea to send them up as a team. They argued that these men knew each other's strengths and weaknesses too well, and they felt sending a team made up of strangers would be more efficient. Nevertheless, the majority of the council was convinced that they would work

stronger as a unit because of their familiarity. Besides, who could have foreseen that petty emotions would destroy the work of rational-thinking scientists?

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The first signs of hostility came as the shuttle had finally made its way through Earth's gravitational pull and was beginning to dock up with the space station. Yuri had been complaining about the pounding pressure in his head for over an hour when Sergei finally snapped. "Didn't you pass the physical tests at the academy with Frank and me?" he asked rhetorically.

"You know damn well I did," Yuri replied, clutching his temples.

"Then why is it that Frank and I are able to withstand this massive pressure that you keep nagging about, and you aren't?"

"I don't know, I guess because you guys are just better than me. Is that what you want to hear, captain?" Yuri stormed out of the room.

Sergei was already agitated by his continual whining, and he saw this comment as a low blow. He had sensed that Yuri was jealous of his position as captain, but the sentiment had finally bubbled over the surface. "What a baby," Sergei said to Frank. "I guess we should've brought a milk bottle up with us as well."

"Go easy on him, Sergei, we don't want this little rift to ruin our team chemistry throughout the whole project." Frank was proving to be the most rational of the three. "Yuri is probably just stressed out about the mission and his headache made him all the more cranky."

"Whatever," Sergei said with a sigh. "He knew what to expect, and if he didn't want to be up here, then he shouldn't have volunteered for the mission. Now, I've been appointed captain of this team and it is my duty to keep everyone in line. Yuri's emotions could damage this entire mission."

At that point, Yuri barged into the room. He had been listening to the conversation in the control room. "Why don't you just flaunt your captain position in our face a little bit more, Sergei? Would it make you feel powerful to report me to the council because my emotions got in the way of the mission?"

"Grow up, Yuri. Have you been spying on us from the control room? Maybe you missed your calling in the KGB."

"Alright you two, knock it off." Frank finally stepped in. "Now, I'm going to the garden to check the PH levels of the soil, and when I get back, I want to see you two doing something productive for a change." With that, Frank walked out.

As he left, Sergei shouted, "Oh, so you think *you're* the captain now, huh?" Frank heard him, but he ignored Sergei and went about his business. He could tell that for whatever reason the surrounding conditions were making Sergei and Yuri act irrationally. The room grew silent. After a few moments of awkward stares and idle thoughts, Sergei decided to try and smooth over the conflict as best as he could. "So, is your head feeling any better?" he asked Yuri.

Yuri wasn't satisfied, and he barked back, "It's a little late for that now!" Once again he marched out the door, and Sergei was now left all alone. He could not believe what was happening. Yuri had never acted like this before. Normally he was polite and professional, but now he was like a ticking time bomb. Sergei wondered if there was

anything he could do to patch up what had once been a friendly relationship.

He decided to ask Frank what he thought he should do. However, as he approached the glass doors of the garden, he saw Frank and Yuri having a conversation, and he was suspicious that it was about him. He decided to go into the control room so he could hear what was being said about him behind his back.

"...and he always uses up all of the toilet paper and then doesn't replace the roll. Now that's just common courtesy." Sergei could not believe what he was hearing. Was that what this was all about? Toilet paper? He quickly decided it was his turn to interrupt the conversation in a blind rage.

He shoved open the doors to the garden. "So that's what this is all about, Yuri? Toilet paper? Why didn't you just say so instead of bottling it all up and lashing out at me little by little?"

"I shouldn't have to say anything," Yuri replied defensively. "You should have the common courtesy to replace the roll after you're done."

"Jeez, why don't you just use the rinse system if there isn't any toilet paper?"

"You mean the bidet from hell? No thank you. If you're too good to use it, then why should I have to?"

"Oh please, why don't you just come out and say it? This isn't about my bathroom habits. You're just jealous because I was named captain of this mission. You have been all along."

"You can have your captain position. I'm perfectly happy as the second flight engineer, thank you very much. I just wish you weren't such an insensitive slob, that's all."

"Oh, so is there anything else you want to get off your chest while we're on the

subject of what's wrong with Sergei?"

"Yes, when you're done brushing your teeth, put up your toothbrush." Sergei laughed in disbelief, but Yuri continued. "I don't want to see your drool all over the sink counter."

"And what if I don't," said Sergei. He was beginning to be perturbed by Yuri's petty insults. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, I'm sure I could think of something," Yuri said, inching closer to Sergei in anticipation of a fight. Frank stepped in between them and silenced their quarreling once again.

"You two are acting like a couple of teenagers. I think you just need to get some sleep and stay away from each other for a couple of days." They both backed down, but Frank kept his arms extended between them as he spoke. "We all have jobs to do, so I suggest that after you guys sleep this off, we should start doing them to the best of our abilities and forget about all of this. We all know we're going to be cooped up in here together for the next two months."

Sergei and Yuri agreed to sleep it off, but Sergei was still on his guard. He had lost a great deal of respect for Yuri, and he now suspected that Yuri might retaliate by doing something cowardly like plotting on him while he slept. He secretly went back to the control room as Yuri prepared for bed. Sure enough, Yuri was not wasting any time.

As Sergei watched him in the bathroom through the video monitors, he urinated, and before flushing the toilet, he grabbed Sergei's toothbrush from the counter and swirled it around in the toilet water. After it had been totally immersed, Yuri quietly set it back down on the counter. Sergei could not see Yuri's face well enough through the monitors,

but he envisioned him snickering about his sick prank.

This was the last straw, Sergei thought, and a fit of rage came over him. He sprinted down the hallway, threw open the bathroom door, and slammed Yuri to the ground. Yuri was in the middle of brushing his teeth when Sergei pounced on him, and he gagged on toothpaste as he writhed on the ground. Sergei began pummeling him, shouting, "You sneaky little bastard!" Frank overheard the struggle, and he immediately ran to Yuri's rescue. He quickly pulled Sergei off of him and shut the bathroom door, keeping Sergei outside in the hallway.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Frank shouted at him. "Don't you know what mission control will say if they find out about this? Our lives as cosmonauts could be over!" For the first time, Frank was beginning to lose control. He was tired of being the mediator of this constant conflict, and he was forcefully letting Sergei know how he felt. He was still tightly clutching Sergei's collar.

Sergei backed away and Frank eased his grip. "He dipped my toothbrush in his own urine, Frank. What do you want me to do?"

"He did *what*?"

"He swirled my toothbrush around in his urine. I saw him on the monitors."

"Well, I definitely don't condone that, but I don't condone your spying on him either, and you have to know that violence certainly is not the answer." He peeked his head in the bathroom door and saw Yuri, still lying on the ground with blood trickling out of his nose. His right hand covered his eyes as he rested his head against the floor. Yuri had such a strong physical stature that everyone in the space program thought he was a fighter, but as Frank stared at him lying on the bathroom floor, he looked helpless and

fragile. "Look at him," said Frank, motioning to Yuri. "Is that what you want?"

"No," said Sergei as he bowed his head. He felt somewhat guilty for beating him, but deep inside he still felt like Yuri had it coming after the toothbrush incident. He decided that he would never apologize, and he would never trust Yuri ever again.

#####

After that night, things were never the same up on the space station. There was no more fussing and fighting, just empty silence and dreary work-related conversations. Frank was no longer burdened with the duty of mediator, but he wasn't any happier. Sergei and Yuri were no longer at each other's throats, but the incident would not be forgotten any time soon. The next several weeks seemed to drag on for years, and when they finally returned to Russian soil, the team never said anything about what had transpired on the space station. They had accomplished their mission, and that was all that needed to be said or known. Frank had gathered sufficient evidence that one day hydroponic growing in space might be feasible, and this made the mission a great success in the eyes of everyone except for the three cosmonauts.

There would be no more playing cards on Saturdays or triple dates for Yuri, Frank and Sergei. One trip to the space station had shattered the friendship of Sergei and Yuri and had almost threatened the mission. However, Frank remained in frequent contact with both of the splintered parties. He was also appointed to the council, and he was determined to make something positive out of the disastrous mission. He decided that he would do everything in his power to never again let the council assign a mission to a team



made up of friends. If the cosmonauts didn't know each other, there was less chance of personal conflicts while they shared the small habitat of the space station. Aside from his scientific findings, Frank had learned one important thing from the mission: Even the most rational-thinking scientists let their emotions get the best of them sometimes.

## Progress

Hurried, everything is accelerating.  
The jowls of technology flap uncontrollably,  
stretching and distorting its face.  
A tapestry of catastrophe is silently created,  
and soon it will cover the majority with authority.  
The four horsemen are galloping over rapid modems,  
approaching at six billion gigabytes per second.  
They are cloaked in normalcy and niceties,  
but only avarice dwells in their swollen bellies.  
And as they gorge themselves on the fruits of capital,  
their expanding girth will soon exhaust their vessels.

Financial equestrians are rendered powerless as pedestrians  
and collapse, stranding the zealous conquerors in a climate of chaos.  
Now secret wars rage with mute weapons of disease  
causing desperate pleas for protection and security,  
but only humility and paranoia remain.  
Abnormal life is sustained.  
Where will we turn?  
When will we learn?  
Progress is a grave concern.

## Asymptotic

Asymptotic  
Nothing can stop this  
exponential curve.  
Some rely on words,  
but one must always observe.

Deceptive acceleration  
is masking the deviation  
from our origins.  
Let us explore again.

The dominoes may soon be falling.  
No one hears our Mother calling,  
for we've exhausted her.

Distant hopes for salvation;  
build another space station  
where we can flee.

## Gears

The obscene clock keeps on ticking,  
wishing harm and malice,  
callous sounds protrude from its gears.  
Fears and beliefs compound through the years  
and wait for the moment to perpetuate a cycle.

Thriving in this discombobulated society,  
is it me or you that has no clue?  
Making so much ado  
about as little as possible.

Please, start stuffing yourself with pleasure  
because the measure of life is so uncertain.  
We will never see the curtain  
as it falls in deafening silence.

## Taking It

"Psy\_hic" On Cheshire Boulevard, in the old industrial district, a red neon sign hummed with electricity, enticing Samuel as he prepared to parallel park on the street outside. He rubbed his chin pensively, stroking a soft patch of peach fuzz. He was nearly thirty, and yet still waiting for that first coarse black hair to reveal itself. Mother would have never let his attempt at a goatee last this long, but Samuel was deciding things now.

Samuel was a man with no distinguishing features to speak of, but he was always well-groomed, and although his clothes weren't the latest style, he made an effort to dress nicely. On this particular night he wore stone-washed jeans, a stained Hawaiian shirt, and his old high school cross-country shoes. Ever since the funeral, he had made a conscientious effort to become a new man, and he had never felt more independent and alive. Yet as he approached the psychic's storefront, his mother's incessant nagging penetrated the shield he had worked so hard to create in his mind. "Sorcery and psychic readings are evils tools of Lucifer!" her voice screeched in his subconscious.

"Be quiet mother," he mumbled into the brisk night air. He forced her words from his mind. At last, he was taking a stand, and although she was not there to see it, finally rebelling from her gave Samuel confidence. It was a little late, sure, but better now than never, he thought. He remained nervous, however, and although he normally wouldn't walk these streets alone, he decided to take a lap around the block before his big undertaking.

Samuel's father died in Vietnam when he was just three years old, and his mother

refused to marry afterward. Thus, Samuel's childhood lacked the influence of a strong, masculine figure. His mother was overbearing to say the least, clutching onto the only joy in her life and nearly strangling it. She watched his every move, corrected every fault, and tried not to let Samuel learn things by experience. She knew exactly what she wanted him to be exposed to, and that was all he was able to see.

Samuel was never allowed to play contact sports in high school or go to the dances. His mother also refused to let him get his license until he was eighteen. She didn't want him corrupted, and restricting his every move was the only way that she thought she could achieve her goal. However, the confines of his sheltered life had only caused Samuel to repress his desires, and conflicting thoughts continually dominated his mind. Nevertheless, he was always too afraid of betraying his mother and shattering her fragile shell, so he kept his emotions bottled up until the day he knew he would finally be free.

He felt extremely guilty about it, but Samuel couldn't hide the feeling that a heavy burden had been lifted from him since his mother had passed away. He had always been responsible for carrying out her every whim, taking on any task without even thinking about it. Running mother's errands was like another six hour work shift, and there were never any holidays, or even a salary for that matter. Now Samuel's boredom and solitude were comforting, and with his spare time he had begun contemplating the right way to finally strike back at mother and make his own personal statement. A week ago he had considered some options: drugs - too damaging, addictive and costly; prostitution - too risky and sleazy; gambling - ridiculous and expensive ...

After a great deal of thought, he had decided to visit a psychic. Psychic readings weren't illegal, yet they were definitely taboo in his mother's mind. Aside from this, he felt

a strange sense of hope that this experience might reveal something important in the curving path of his life. He had always shunned superstition and unexplained phenomena before, but at this point in his life he was willing to give it a chance. As the neon sign came into view again, its missing letter made Samuel question the legitimacy of the business for a moment. However, he convinced himself that this was a common problem among other respected businesses, and he was probably just looking for an excuse to back out, something that he now refused to do. He had deliberately gone to the southeast side of town, where there was little chance of anyone recognizing him, and he was finally taking the plunge.

He pushed open the door and bells chimed in rhythm to a mysterious type of music that he had never heard before. The sounds of water-logged drums and melting steel filled the room. A woman with dark, angular eyes and sharp features sat comfortably on a large pillow next to a short wicker table. She wore a vivid, flowing dress of red, orange and yellow, and her feet were uncovered, revealing strange brown tattoos that wrapped around her ankles like ivy. Incense permeated the air, and artistic renderings of mysticism covered the walls. Everything was almost too predictable; it was all like something out of an old movie. Samuel approached the woman sheepishly. "This is your first time?" she said abruptly.

"Yes," Samuel said, gazing at his shoes to avoid eye contact, "I'm just testing the waters."

"Well, I assure you, these waters are extremely deep and powerful." Samuel was taken aback by the confidence that this woman exuded in her voice and her gestures. "My name is Sasitsma, communicator with the elements, reader of approaching fate." Her

wording and dialect were mystical and enchanting, and Samuel began to feel sexually aroused by her, unlike any other woman he had ever seen. "What is your name?"

"Do you have to ask me, or do you already know?" Samuel replied. Although he felt somewhat confused and uneasy, he also felt a playful impulse.

"Well, I'm sure that your name is biblical. I want to say...Samson?"

Samuel swallowed, amazed at how close she had come. "It's actually Samuel, but that's pretty impressive."

"Ah, Samuel. I should have known."

"Why do you say that?"

"I knew Samson was close, but something was telling me it wasn't quite correct."

"I don't want to be bothersome, but I'm curious, what exactly is it that tells you these things? Are you reading my mind?"

"Oh, no, I do not exercise telepathic powers. I'm merely a channeler." Sasitsma shifted her weight and crossed her legs again as she spoke. "Every fabric of your being exists outside of your physical body, and I am simply able to transmit the signals and follow the clues that you leave behind. I didn't ask for this ability, but it was given to me for some reason."

"Do you believe in God?" Samuel enquired almost involuntarily.

"Did that question come from you, or someone close to you?" Samuel was puzzled, unsure of what she was implying. He had the suspicion that she was referring to his mother, but this frightened him, and he backed away.

"I'm sorry, I guess my question was inappropriate and of little importance."

"No, you did not make me uncomfortable, and on the contrary, your question is of



great importance. You're religious, aren't you. Christian?"

"Yes, but I asked you." Samuel was nervous and trying to deflect each of her arrows as they pierced his subconscious.

"I believe that everything on this planet and in the entire universe is all intertwined. Everything contains some fragment of life force, and you can call this God or anything else that you want, but by your definition, I believe we are all God." Her proclamations were beginning to make Samuel feel uneasy. He started to understand why his mother had considered people like Sasitsma deviants.

"Well, that sure is interesting, but ..."

The psychic interrupted forcefully, "Why are you really here?"

Samuel bowed his head. "To tell you the truth, I don't know." He began to rub his hands against one another. "I thought that experiencing a new realm might give me some answers about myself and possibly a different perspective, but I'm beginning to feel perplexed and conflicted."

"Don't feel that way. There is no confusion here. I am beginning to see exactly what haunts you and urges you to seek change. In your past, I see a strong female figure, most likely an overbearing mother. She is no longer with you physically, but her presence is still very dominant in your mind. She inhibits you, she warns you, she irritates you to this day, doesn't she."

Samuel nodded lifelessly. He was bewildered; his mind wandered. He stared at the woman blankly but no longer heard what she was saying. He didn't want to; he was afraid. Could she really view his interior like some painted canvas on display, or was he simply that predictable? If she really could see it, did that mean she was evil? His

mother's morals still nagged at him and flooded his mind with questions, but deep inside his frayed psyche he knew that this captivating conjurer was authentic. She immediately pinpointed the element that had dictated Samuel's life up to this point. His mother was eternally giving advice and commands, and he just kept taking it. Thoughts and emotions churned inside his mind as he reached the realization that he had dodged for so long. At that moment, a part of Samuel died. He knew things had to change. He swallowed hard and prepared to speak.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go." He stood up slowly and began to back out of the room.

"I hope I have not frightened you, Samuel."

"No, no, I just realized what time it was. I have to meet someone in fifteen minutes." He was lying, and Sasitsma could see right through it, but she said nothing as he swung the door open and the bells jingled. Samuel hurriedly walked out to his car. He opened up the driver's side door of his burgundy Ford Taurus, plopped down in the seat, and began to turn the key in the ignition. However, before the car started up, he was distracted by a woman outside next to the car parallel parked in front of him. She was clutching her temples with her palms and talking to herself. She looked like an attractive woman. He could tell that she was of Asian descent and her skin and hair were beautiful. Gradually, Samuel worked up the nerve to get out of the car and ask her if he could help with anything.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?"

The woman turned toward him after he addressed her. She had a look of surprise on her face, and Samuel was captivated by her beauty. "Yes, I can't believe it. I run into

that store for about ten minutes and I come out to find my tire is completely flat." She motioned toward the front right tire, which was almost completely deflated. "It sounds stupid, but I don't even know where to begin changing a tire."

"Well, I suppose I could do it for you."

"Oh, that's sweet of you. Are you sure? I feel so bad. I don't even know your name and I'm asking you for help."

"My name is Samuel, and yours?"

"I'm Michelle. That's awfully kind of you to help out a complete stranger."

"Well, I try to be a good Samaritan." Samuel thought about what he just said, and he felt stupid. This was the first time he had talked to an attractive woman in months, and he had to bring in Biblical references. "Will you open up your trunk for me?" Michelle walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. Samuel quickly found the tire jack, lug nut wrench, and spare tire, and he carried them around to the front of the car to begin working on the flat. Within minutes he had the car elevated and the flat tire removed. He placed the spare tire on and began fastening the lug nuts. Michelle was watching him intently. "So, do you think that you could do this by yourself now after watching me?"

"Yes, I think so. I guess I just never had to learn before." Samuel fastened the last lug nut and brushed his grease-stained hands against each other a couple of times. "Do you need a piece of cloth to wipe off your hands with?" Michelle asked him.

"Yeah, that would be great." She leaned into the back seat of her car and then handed him a blue piece of cloth. As he wiped his hands the two of them sat in silence.

"So, I guess I better be on my way," Samuel said with a sigh.

"Well, thank you very much. I don't know how long I would've stood out here waiting on someone else if you hadn't shown up."

"Oh, it was no big problem. I like to help people in need."

"Hey, would you maybe like to go out to dinner with me sometime?" Michelle sprung the question on Samuel and then looked down at the street. Samuel couldn't believe his ears. The proposal seemed to come out of nowhere, and not only had he never been asked out by a girl before, but he had never even gotten this close to a girl as beautiful as Michelle. He was overwhelmed. Thoughts raced in his head. For a moment he thought about what his mother would think, but he stopped himself. He had to forget about her now. What else could he say but yes?

"Sure," Samuel said with a smile. Michelle looked up at him and smiled back at his response. "Just tell me when and where." Michelle reached into her purse, pulled out a pen and a scrap piece of paper, and scribbled down her phone number. She handed it to him and suddenly gave him a peck on the lips.

"Surprise me," she whispered, and with that she climbed into her car and began to drive away. Samuel stood there by the sidewalk, bewildered. He couldn't believe what had just transpired. Chills went down the back of his neck and he almost felt numb. Maybe he really was becoming a new man after all.

## Absent Lover

Who am I?  
A question rarely answered.  
Late for my emotional manicure,  
the panic in her voice shocks me.  
She mocks me every time she stares;  
all of her cares seem to be on her sleeve.  
Mine are hard to believe.  
Confined, I can no longer leave.

Fantasy appeals to me because then I'm in control,  
and when the wanderings of my soul  
become too real everything can be erased.  
I've got all the time to waste  
in this hollow world where all is replaced  
by something more convenient and less deviant.

Let me be expedient in pouring out  
my fears and desires into one churning mire.  
My love for you is a wounded fire  
that flickers in the aftermath  
of the dark and tainted night.

## Along the Coast

The semicircular shadow of the moon  
dictates the tide from the sky in which it looms.  
Waves of sound penetrate  
the calm that keeps us amused.

Our eyes express a longing for rain,  
to wet the flame and expose the fuse.  
You notice my bruise and fixate on healing.

Reeling, I search for cover.  
Comfort often escapes a lover.  
Tonight the clouds obscure constellations  
and relations are lost in conversations.

Now our eyes return from brief vacations to the heavens.

## Continual Compensation

Restless, but coping with opiates.  
Everything remains understated.  
Apathy is meaningless.

Drowsy, yet awakened by your thoughts.  
Vivid hues become bland in the twilight.  
Perception is peculiar.

Hurried, still avoiding commitment.  
Vicariously dreaming for a small price.  
Reality is vacant.

Groggy, despite hours of respite.  
Hopelessly coasting through another milestone.  
Fighting time is futile.

Laughing, even though your number's been called.  
Still seeking continual compensation.  
Life is unavoidable.

## Your Song

Falling back on the others you know.  
Searching for some kind of stability.  
Thinking about what you'd change.  
Telling anyone who'll listen.  
Fearing the worst is yet to come.  
Dreaming occurrences at random.  
Feeling futile but sure.  
Hoping to be there some day.

Sleeping too much now and then.  
Wasting your time while you're young.  
Pleasing too many all at once.  
Acting as if everything were fine.  
Breathing the air with a wince.  
Daring to break from your mold.  
Wishing the world were divine.  
Playing your song all the time.



## Grandpa

"So you need some more bed liners, and is that it?....You're already out of tissues?...." My mother was pacing around the kitchen talking on the cordless phone. My father and I sat at the dinner table eating in silence, listening to the phone conversation and only hearing her side of it. However, we both knew without a doubt that she was talking to her father. "Well, two boxes will last you a while Dad....Uh huh.... So, can you think of anything else?....Alright then, I'll probably stop by sometime tomorrow....Bye bye." She hung up the phone and sat back down to finish dinner. "That was Dad on the phone," she said with a faint laugh, the way she always did when he called.

"We figured as much," said my father in between bites of beef stroganoff.

Grandpa always seemed to call at either 6 a.m. or 6 p.m., so he was either waking up my mom or interrupting dinner, and he always needed something when he called. He was in a facility for the elderly about twenty minutes down the road from us and mom did all of his shopping.

My mother sighed lightheartedly and said, "He always needs something, you know."

"Yeah, I just wish he'd tell you everything all at once so that you didn't have to make so many trips to the store," my father replied, his fork making a clinking noise as it hit his empty plate. He had won the family eating race as usual. "I know it's a hassle for you, and you don't have enough free time as it is."

"Yeah, but, oh well. What can you do about it? He's my father."

I know my grandpa's situation wore on my mother emotionally sometimes, but she

was a strong woman, and she knew how to handle it. She practiced law in a nearby town and had a busy schedule, yet she always made time for my older brother and I when we were growing up, and now she had to make time for Grandpa. Looking back on it, I think I took her talents for granted when I was young. Now that I had been living on my own at college for a few years, I began to appreciate what she did all the more. At times like this when I was home during the summer, I noticed her flurried pace and tried to lend a helping hand when I could. Now that my brother and I had grown up, the main person mom had to spend time taking care of was her own 81-year-old father.

My grandfather was once a sharp young chemical engineer, educated at Washington University and working at various chemical facilities throughout the country in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. He raised my mother and her two brothers, and he was there to see my early years of development. However, after his wife died when I was just four or five, he was never the same. He tried to commit suicide unsuccessfully, and after he gave up on that desperate logic, he fell into a deep state of depression. There were several years when he never left his house and he was like a ghost to me. Grandpa Turnquist was seldom talked about; never at the birthday parties or the little league games or anything like that. I remember seeing him at my uncle's wedding when I was seven. He was wearing dark sunglasses inside of the church and the reception area. It was so mysterious to me and I always wondered why he was wearing them that day, but I never asked.

Growing up I would see Grandpa usually at Christmas and Easter, have brief, awkward conversations, and then not see him again for months. Sometimes now I feel bad for my mom because I never really had a relationship with her parents. My dad's parents lived nearby, were in good health, and we did things with them all of the time. But

mom's mother was dead and her father wasn't able to give that grandfather's influence to a young boy. I could tell that it hurt her because she did remember the old grandpa, the one that I can only vaguely recall, and sometimes when she talked about him I could see the tears start to creep in from behind her eyes.

"You know, you haven't seen your Grandpa in a while, Travis," my mother spoke up, breaking the dinner table silence that had been lingering.

"Yeah, I know," I replied briefly, still eating my dinner. I wasn't very talkative on this particular evening. The topic of Grandpa didn't really help much either. I hated to be that way, but his situation was sort of depressing to me, and I knew it made my mother sad.

"I guess it's been since Easter, hasn't it?"

"Yep."

"That's probably the last time you went to church too, isn't it," my dad interjected, either to divert the conversation or simply to push my buttons. I decided I'd rather talk about Grandpa than my church attendance.

"Anyway..." I trailed off, not even finishing a complete thought or sentence.

"Well, I think you should go see him sometime before you go back to school," my mother continued.

"I'm heading back Saturday, so that's only like three or four days. There are a lot of people I should go see before I go back, but I don't have enough time."

"Why not? You already quit your job. What else do you have to do?" I could tell she was somewhat agitated. It meant a lot to her for me to go spend some time with my grandfather. He had made some progress and had moved up from the nursing home to

assisted living, which I guess is like having your own apartment, except that people cook for you, clean for you and take care of you. He could actually carry on a coherent conversation and things like that now, and mom was proud of him. She wanted me to see how much more normal he was now than in my youth. "Besides, you can thank him in advance for your birthday money and that way you won't have to send him a thank you note while you're at school."

I gave up. "Alright, I'll go see him. When should I go?"

"Well, he doesn't exactly have a busy schedule," my mother said sarcastically. Then her eyes slightly widened and she nodded her head silently. I could tell that an idea had popped into her head. "Hey, you can take him his supplies tomorrow and that way I won't have to leave work early."

"So I have to go shopping too?"

"No, I'll go tonight and that way you'll just have to get up and take them to him."

"And what exactly am I taking to him?"

"Bed liners, that's it."

"What are bed liners?"

"You lay them down under your bed sheets so that the mattress won't get soaked. Dad's been having troubles with incontinence lately."

"You know what that means, don't you?" my dad said to me.

"Of course I do," I said, feeling somewhat patronized. My dad was a high school principal who was obsessed with words. He was always quizzing me with scholarly words like pedantic and bucolic, but this one was easy enough to offend me. "So these are basically like some kind of cross between a diaper and a bed sheet?"

"I guess you can say that," my mother said.

"Sweet," I replied sarcastically, rolling my eyes and leaning back in my chair.

"Don't lean back on two legs like that," my mother snapped at me. She had reprimanded me for that for years now, but I still did it nightly. I continued with the previous conversation.

"I'm glad I don't have to go buy those things. Don't you feel weird when you plop those down on the checkout line and there are people behind you?"

"I don't care what those people think. Somebody's got to buy them. Are you that self conscious?"

"I guess so."

"Well, I'll go buy them tonight and all you'll have to do is deliver them to your Grandpa tomorrow afternoon. It will be painless, I promise," my mother said with a grin.

"I'll let him know that you're coming." She picked up the phone and hit the speed dial.

"Dad....Yeah, it's me again....I just wanted to let you know that Travis is going to drop off your bed liners tomorrow instead of me....Yeah, Travis....He's going back to college soon and he wanted to get a chance to see you...." She looked at me as she said this. We both knew it wasn't true, but I guess she just wanted to make Grandpa feel special. I mean, it's not like it was really my idea to go see him. "Okay....Yeah, he'll be there around 3 o'clock or so....Well, he sleeps pretty late....Alright, so when you see a big bearded guy at your door don't be afraid or anything. It's just Travis!....Bye bye." She smiled as she hung up the phone. "He's looking forward to seeing you."

"Good," I said, half-way smiling.

"Look, Travis," my mother's tone grew serious. "I know hanging out with your

grandfather isn't high on your list of things to do, but you know, one day he just might not be around anymore." Tears were beginning to well up in her eyes, but she held them back.

"Jeez, mom, you don't have to guilt trip me about it. I said I'd go."

"Well, it shouldn't be such an issue. You should want to go see your Grandfather." My dad remained silent throughout the conversation. This was quite rare considering the majority of my family's dinner table discussions, so I could tell that he clearly didn't want to get involved in this one.

"It just depresses me to see those people in the home. It's like entering another dimension or something."

"Well, someday you might have to live in a place like that, and how will you feel if none of your family wants to come see you?"

"I better never live in a place like that," I said firmly. "I'm going to put it in my will or something. I would rather just die than live in a place like that."

"Now, come on," my mother spoke up. "Don't say that. It's not that bad there. Your Grandpa is in assisted living now and it's not that much different than having your own apartment. You shouldn't ever say things like that."

"I'm sorry," I said. I felt guilty. "I know Grandpa's not living a tortured life or anything; I'm just saying that I don't ever want to live like that."

"I'm sure it is lonely," my mother replied. "But that's why Grandpa needs his family to come and visit him. I'm sure he'll love it when you go there tomorrow." She was starting to cry again. I got up, set my plate and silverware in the sink, and gave it a quick rinse. I hated getting involved in these emotional conversations with my parents. It's not as if I am too immature to deal with emotional topics. I just don't like to see

people cry, and my mom is extremely prone to tears.

I walked out of the kitchen as my parents still sat at the table in silence. I stretched out on the sofa in the next room and flipped on the television with the remote. My mother yelled from the kitchen, "So you remember how to get there, right?"

"Yes," I shouted back. This was another popular thing in my house. Rather than getting up and walking into the next room to talk, you simply cranked up the volume and continued the conversation.

"Okay, he's expecting you around three," she belted back. "He's in room 309, remember? It's the last door on the right once you turn left out of the elevator."

"Alright," I responded. I could tell that this little trip to Grandpa's meant a lot to my mom, so I wasn't going to forget to show up. She continued to remind me throughout the night though, and I simply gave a hollow response and reverted my attention back to whatever was on the television at that time.

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"Da-neet da-neet, da-neet da-neet..." My alarm clock continued to sound and grind on my subconscious until I finally rolled over and turned it off. I took my index finger and thumb and pressed hard against my sinuses, rubbing against the area just above my eyebrows. It was 2:30 in the afternoon. A lot of my friends laughed at me for having to set an alarm in order to wake up by 3:00 p.m., but I was just enjoying my summer. Some people love to get up early and spend the day doing something, but I'm just the opposite. I would rather sleep through the entire morning and stay up until 4:00 a.m. I

worked at a restaurant for my summer job and I never had to be at work before 5:00 in the evening, so my summer consisted of several days when I didn't arise until the middle of the afternoon. However, rather than feeling rested and energized, I often felt groggy and bored. After sleeping for so long, the days seemed to go by in a quick haze, and I never felt like I was getting anything accomplished.

Today my only task was the delivery to Grandpa, and as I lay there in bed, I realized that I was supposed to be at his place in under thirty minutes. I rolled over onto my left side and saw a grocery bag lying on the floor. It had a yellow sticky note on it, and I could already tell that it was mom's doing. I slowly arose and peeled the note off of the bag so I could read it. It read, "Travis - Here are the bed liners that you need to take to Grandpa. He's expecting you around 3 o'clock, so don't be late! I'm glad that you are getting a chance to spend some time with him. I'll see you after work. Love, Mom." I smiled slightly as I sighed and stretched my arms toward the ceiling. Then I bent over and picked up the package of bed liners inside of the grocery bag. I curiously read the labels and packaging. "Meijer Brand Bed Liners - Ultimate Mattress Protection." I wondered if Grandpa would be embarrassed that I was bringing them to him. He was used to my mother taking care of him and knowing his most intimate physical problems, but he barely knew me, and he had to know that I was aware of what I was bringing him. I was prepared for a rather awkward meeting, but there was nothing I could do to change that, because my mother would be livid if I just didn't show up.

I didn't have time to take a shower, but my hair was sticking out in all directions. I roll around a lot in my sleep and I have thick hair, so when I wake up in the morning (or afternoon), my hair is matted down and sticking up in various angles like a wild badger. I



knew that grandpa wasn't exactly hard to impress, but I didn't want to look like a complete slob in our first exchange in almost a year, so I got my hair wet and combed it. After I was somewhat groomed, I walked out of my room with my his package, downstairs and out the side door adjacent to our driveway. I climbed into my car, placing the package in my passenger seat, and started up the engine. My clock read 2:46 p.m., so I had roughly fifteen minutes to get to Sunset Village, my grandfather's assisted living facility. It was about twenty five minutes away, so I was going to be late, but I shrugged it off and slowly backed out of my driveway, singing along to my CD that had begun to play.

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I pulled into the parking lot of Sunset Village at 3:13, about fifteen minutes late. As I parked my car I noticed that there were several more handicapped parking spots than in a normal lot, but none of them were occupied. I guess this is common at an assisted living facility. I slowly walked around to the side door with my grandfather's package dangling from my right hand, the white plastic handles twisting and turning as I walked. Before I entered the side door, I noticed a nice little sitting area in the shade outside with a miniature fountain and some padded rocking chairs. It looked like a serene little area, but no one was sitting there, and I had the feeling that no one had for some time.

I pulled open the side door and entered the lobby area of the first floor. Immediately I smelled the odd mix of sterilizers and cafeteria food that you can only find in a place like this. I used to deliver pizzas to a retirement home in my hometown, and it had the exact same smell. I always hated sitting there in the lobby, with a steaming pizza

box in my hand as they paged whoever ordered it while the staring window crowd turned their attention on me. It just made me uncomfortable and depressed, and I always breathed a sigh of relief as I drove away. Those memories were coming back to me as I approached the elevator, but I tried to toss them aside and continued with my mission. As I waited for the elevator to arrive on the first floor, I overheard two old women having a conversation as they sat in large reclining chairs near the elevator. "It seems like all I have to do is sleep, so I keep sleeping, but I never feel rested anyway," one woman said to the other. I laughed inside, because I could actually relate completely to what the woman was saying. That probably wasn't a good thing at my ripe young age, but I didn't know exactly what that was supposed to mean.

"Ding!" The bell on the elevator rang as it opened in front of me. I waited for a moment to see if anyone was coming out, but no one came forward, so I stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the third floor. As I stood in the elevator silently while it ascended, I thought for a moment about how relaxed the attitude seemed to be at Sunset Village. In this day in age, I am used to going through security measures in all aspects of my life, but no one even asked me who I was there to see when I walked into this place. I could've been a complete psychopath for all they know, hell-bent on causing a scene in the midst of helpless elders, and no one would've stopped me. I guess that is the chance they take in order to maintain a quiet and non-intrusive existence for their residents. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. I would love to be naive to the evils of the world for once.

The elevator door opened on the third floor and my wandering train of thought was broken once again. My grandfather's room was the last door on the right down the south hallway, and as I approached it, the muffled hum of a television set began to grow

louder. As I continued to get closer, I could hear the high-pitched sound effects of what I assumed was an old cartoon. Once I stopped in front of Grandpa's door, it became obvious that the noises were coming from his room. I knocked on the door loudly.

"Yes," I heard my grandfather's voice from inside. "Come in!" I opened the door and stood in the entrance way, staring at him. He was in a wheelchair, hunched over in front of his computer screen. The last time I saw him he was using a walker, but now I guess he was confined to a wheelchair. I suddenly realized that I was just staring at him silently, so I spoke up.

"How's it going, Grandpa," I said. This hollow salutation was all I could muster at that moment.

"Well, I guess you could say that I've been better, and I've been worse," he said with a grin. "So you brought my bed liners?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Yep, here they are," I said as I set the package down on the floor beside me. I didn't want the bed wetting conversation to come up, but I was glad that he didn't seem the least bit embarrassed about what I was bringing him.

He rolled his wheelchair over to the closet, opened one of the sliding doors and motioned inside of it. "You can set them in here." I picked them up off of the floor, set them inside of the closet on a shelf, and closed the door. Now that that was out of the way, and all I had to do was think of something to start up a conversation. However, the television was blaring the sounds of an old Tom and Jerry cartoon and I was already sort of nervous, so my mind was racing and I couldn't think of a word to say. I glanced at the computer screen and saw that he was playing some sort of card game, and I knew that this interested him, so I thought I would begin there.

"Are you playing euchre there, Grandpa?" I saw four hands being played, and this was the only game that came to mind.

"Pardon?" he responded. He had become severely hard of hearing in his old age, hence the extraordinarily loud television volume. I wondered if his next door neighbors had bad hearing as well, or whether they just cursed him at night and prayed for a new neighbor.

"I said, are you playing euchre there on the computer?" I spoke louder this time.

"No, this is bridge."

"Oh, I don't know how to play that."

"Really? Well, it's a fun game. You should learn sometime." My grandfather's responses were rather terse. I wasn't sure if he felt nervous and just wanted me to leave or if he just didn't care to elaborate much anymore. Nevertheless, I continued to pursue the conversation.

"So, who are you playing against?"

"Pardon?"

"Who are you playing against?!"

"Oh, well, the computer controls the other three hands, but I usually beat him," he said triumphantly.

"It doesn't just come down to the luck of the cards?"

"Oh no, you have to know how to play them. Luck never gets you very far." I thought about what he said for a moment, and it made me feel better about him. I could tell that he still had interesting things going on inside of his frail old mind, and whether or not he could always express them, he still had to ponder them sometimes. I knew the

computer bridge conversation was stalling, so I diverted the conversation to something else that I thought we might be able to carry on about.

"Are you excited about the upcoming football season?" I asked. Grandpa had always been a huge football fan, especially when it came to following the University of Washington, his old alma mater. Even when he was struggling through his hardest bouts with depression, he always had a Sports Illustrated subscription and kept up on the current sports scene.

"Oh, I'm very excited. I can't wait to watch those Huskies this year. I hear they have some Samoan kid at quarterback that is supposed to be really tough."

"Yeah, I think his name's Touiasosopo."

"I don't know anything about that," Grandpa replied, bewildered. I don't think the name registered in his mind.

"No, that's the name of Washington's Samoan quarterback, Touiasosopo."

"Oh, I see." Grandpa nodded his head and leaned back in his wheelchair. "You know I graduated from Washington almost sixty years ago now."

"Wow. I'm sure it has changed a lot since then."

"I know it has. Everything else has." He was beginning to sound somewhat despondent. "Yeah, time just keeps flying by, and the older you get, it just seems faster and faster." I simply nodded my head and remained silent. I was amazed at how philosophical my grandfather was being with me. All of our previous conversations had been mindless and awkward, but now, he was opening up to me for some reason. "I can't really remember what all happened yesterday, but I can remember my days at Washington and I can remember my wedding, and I can remember the day your mother was born like

they *were* yesterday. You're in college now, aren't you?"

"Yep," I replied, still somewhat shocked and amazed by the fluidity of our conversation.

"Well, before you know it, you just might be staring outside of this window just like me, wondering where it all went and what it all leads to."

"By the time I get to be your age, I don't know if I'll even want to see what the world is like, Grandpa."

"Perhaps you're right, but I thought almost the same exact thing when I was your age. We thought there would be flying cars, alien invasions, and all of this stuff that never came true. However, I never thought I would be able to live this long, or play a card game on this machine, or anything like that. You never really know what the future will bring."

Just then, someone rapped on the door quickly and interrupted our conversation. A plump female nurse walked in before Grandpa had a chance to acknowledge her. She held a small, transparent cup with two pills inside of it. She set it on top of my grandfather's table and addressed him. "It's time to take your meds, Cecil."

"Okay," Grandpa replied happily. I was secretly wondering what kind of medication they were giving him and what exactly it was doing to him. I wondered if he knew. "This is my grandson Travis, Gina." He motioned toward me and I smiled and nodded at the woman.

"Pleased to meet you, Travis."

"Likewise."

"Your grandfather has told me a lot about you. I'm glad you had a chance to

visit." She smiled politely and began to walk out of the room. I wondered if Grandpa had really told her about me, or if that was just something she said to all of the visitors. "I'll see you after dinner, Cecil. Nice to meet you, Travis." She closed the door behind her.

"She's a really nice young lady," Grandpa said.

"I'm sure she is." I was still thinking about all of the things that he had said earlier, and I was afraid that the little interruption by the nurse had ruined our moment for good. Grandpa wheeled over to his table and grabbed the little cup of pills. He placed them on his tongue, grabbed glass of water beside them, and swallowed them down. He then returned his focus to the computer screen. His bridge game had been waiting on his turn for the duration of our conversation and the nurse encounter, and now he was turning his attention back toward it. I could tell that it was hopeless to pursue anything further. I had witnessed a rare side of my grandfather, and I decided that I should just be thankful for that and leave before he began to feel uncomfortable around me again. He could never handle visitors for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

"Well Grandpa, I had better get going. I don't want to be late for dinner." This really wasn't true, because we wouldn't be eating for at least three hours, but I needed an excuse, and I knew that this would suffice.

"Alright then," he said, smiling. "Thank you for the delivery."

"Not a problem," I said. "I was glad to get a chance to see you before I went back to college for the year."

"Good to see you, too. Okay, good luck with your studies."

"Thanks." I approached as if to give him a hug, but I just patted him on the back affectionately. This time I really was glad to see him. I had gotten a chance to have an

intelligent conversation with him, possibly the last one we would ever have, and I felt at peace because at least I could say that. As I walked out the door he beckoned me once more.

"Travis!" he yelled.

"Yes," I replied, walking back into the room. Now I was anticipating some wise piece of advice upon my departure.

"Tell your mother that I am going to need more razors and shaving cream sometime this week."

"Sure thing," I said, and then I closed the door and began to walk down the hallway toward the elevator. I chuckled. Some things about Grandpa would never change. I felt as if I had experienced a breakthrough for a moment, but after the nurse had interrupted the flow of our discourse, Grandpa acted as if it had never happened. I wondered if he really forgot, or if he just didn't feel like getting that philosophical with me again. Either way, I knew that I had seen a side of my grandfather that I had never seen before and would likely never see again. As I rode the elevator down alone, I thought about what I had said the day before to my mother about rather dying than living like Grandpa. After today's occurrences, I felt like an ass for saying that, and I seemed to have an entirely different outlook on aging and life in general.

Perhaps there would still be hope for me yet.